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*** World Roma Day

** Ten Years of Lawlessness

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A day after April 8, Romano Dija, or World Roma Day, the press in Slovenia extensively reported on the exotic traditions of these "nomadic people" and the problems they face throughout the world. The Roma celebrate April 8 because it was the day when they formed their association in London, and in Slovenia it has been celebrated for 15 years. According to official data some 7,000 Roma live in Slovenia, but unofficial sources put the figure at about 10,000. This shows that in addition to ethnic Hungarians who number about 8,000, Roma are among the largest, if not the largest, ethnic minority in Slovenia.

Despite this, however, the Roma have been waiting for 10 years for parliament to pass a bill specifying their rights more clearly. True, Article 65 of the Slovenian Constitution says that Slovenia recognizes the Roma community, provides for its position in society, and will pass a law regulating their specific rights. This special law, however, is nowhere in sight. If someone even mentions this question, Slovenian state bodies immediately resort to temporary solutions. Thus Slovenia signed the General Convention on Protection of Minorities put forth by the Council of Europe, although simultaneously it limited its implementation to members of "indigenous" minorities – Italians, Hungarians and Roma. And since only Roma do not enjoy the protection of specific laws, during the ratification of this declaration a provision was added saying that it will fully apply to Roma the minute Slovenia passes a special law on the protection of the Roma community. It would be much easier to adopt a special law, but it seems that the political will for that is still lacking.

During celebrations of World Roma Day, this issue was tackled by Slovenian Parliament Speaker Borut Pahor. At a gathering of Roma in Murska Sobota he demonstrated the state cared about them by mentioning provisions of the laws on welfare, local self-government and education that pertain to the Roma community. The local population in the Prekmurje region, where most of Slovenia's Roma live, was disappointed by Pahor's comforting gesture. Many expected some concrete steps by the state. The press said on the following day that the Parliament speaker "never mentioned the fact that not even 10 years after passing the Constitution, has the Slovenian state made good on the promise it made to the Roma."

The head of Murska Sobota municipality, Anton Slavic, also sarcastically noted that it appears Roma will continue to be left to the good will of local communities. This is hardly a consequence of state carelessness alone, and it appears that something else is also at stake. A recently published international study on "human development" lists Slovenia as still belonging to a category of countries which are pronouncedly intolerant of "others" and those who are "different." A deficit of tolerance at the beginning of 1992 was obvious; but over the following years it has subtly differentiated. The "different ones" who Slovenians reject are mostly drug addicts and alcoholics, whereas intolerance for "others" – mainly Bosniaks, Serbs, and immigrants – had its ups and downs in the past years. The only exception is a consistently high rejection of the Roma.

As shown by the study on human development -- the new Slovenian ombudsman, Matjaz Hanzek is in charge of this project in Slovenia -- "Slovenia is still considered among the most intolerant countries." On average, Slovenians' intolerance for drunkards, rightist extremists, Muslims, Jews, and Roma, is some 10 percent higher than in other European countries. The Helsinki Watch of Slovenia publishes regular reports on discrimination against the Roma in Slovenia. They say, among other things, that Slovenians do not consider most of Roma "an indigenous ethnic group." Slovenia recognizes that status to only Roma who arrived in Slovenia "before the 15th century," whereas the rest, that is, those who came over the last five centuries, have simply been erased from the police registers at the time Slovenia declared its independence.

The most bizarre element in this story is the fact that Slovenia was entrusted with leading a project on Roma within the South-East Europe Stability Pact. For this purpose, Slovenia last year received DM600,000 for establishing an international center for inter-ethnic relations, and DM200,000 for "bilateral cooperation and the protection of minorities." The Roma received one million German marks to participate in the project aimed at advancing the position of the Roma population." Before setting sail for international waters, however, Slovenia should better settle its Roma problem at home, because otherwise it will be somewhat awkward for it to lecture others about something that it has a problem with. If not, then at least tasks inside the Stability Pact should be distributed more responsibly in the future.

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